**Why Language Learning is Important**

**Preparing Students to be Globally Competent**

It is vitally important for all Kentucky students to be prepared to engage with the world.

In the words of Anthony Jackson of the Asia Society:

*In matters of national security, environmental sustainability, and economic development, what we do as a nation and in our everyday lives is inextricably intertwined with what governments, businesses, and individuals do beyond our borders.*

Twenty-first century lives are not lived in isolation. We go to school with, work with and live in neighborhoods with people from other cultures who speak other languages. Our state’s economy depends strongly on the international trade of small and large Kentucky businesses. Foreign companies invest billions of dollars in the Commonwealth and provide us thousands of jobs. We engage in citizen diplomacy and military actions with hundreds of countries both at home and across the globe.

For nearly everyone in today’s world, English is an absolute, but in America, **English alone is not enough**. Our country’s geographic isolation and the global importance of English have contributed to our false sense of security in regard to our need for world language competence. To compete academically, economically and politically, and function successfully in a global society, American students need to be globally competent—and that means being able to communicate and interact effectively in ***at least* one other language and culture.**

Today, in 20 out of 25 industrialized countries, students start their formal world language learning in grades K-5. Twenty-one countries in the European Union require nine years of language study. International business leaders are warning us that American graduates competing for the same jobs as their peers from other countries, may be technically competent but are increasingly culturally deprived and linguistically illiterate compared with graduates from other countries.

**BEING ACADEMICALLY PREPARED**

**College readiness** requires that students have the pre-requisite coursework for admission and that they have the knowledge and skills to succeed in entry-level classes.

Kentucky universities require world language learning for admission, in fact, both the University of Kentucky and Western Kentucky University requir e a demonstration of a specific proficiency level.

Success in post-secondary classes is most often described as:

--Strong intellectual growth throughout the primary and secondary years.

--The ability to think critically and problem solve in the context of a continuously

changing set of circumstances and realities.

--The advancement of literacy skills.

--The capacity to communicate effectively with individuals from a variety of

cultural and professional backgrounds.

World language learning, particularly when begun in strong elementary school programs, **spurs cognitive growth, builds literacy, and enables students to effectively interact with others in diverse cultural contexts.**

Research has found that learning another language, particularly at a young age, has significant **cognitive benefits**, such as increased memory function, critical thinking, and mind-mapping skills, creativity, and flexibility of mind. With its activities in decoding, shifting between different symbol systems and divergent thinking, language learning is an exercise in problem solving, whose benefits transfers to other content areas. Studies have shown that students who are learning another language out-score their non-foreign language-learning peers in the verbal and, surprisingly to some, the math sections of standardized tests.

By engaging in learning a world language students build 21st century **literacy skills** essential for their future. Reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing are integral to the world language learning process. When students learn a second language they build proficiency in three modes of communication: interpersonal (person-to-person speaking or writing), interpretive (listening and reading) and presentational (one-way speaking and writing). They learn to understand the structure and patterns of language, ask and answer questions, identify words, describe; retell stories, interpret text, and apply the conventions of language, similar to what is required to meet the Kentucky Core Academic Standards for English Language Arts.

Study of a classical language bolsters an understanding of the mechanics of language, vocabulary and the history and literature of the ancient world. Acquiring a Romance or Germanic language involves learning an additional phonetic system, a new vocabulary and extra language conventions. Learning an Asian language means learning to read by character recognition and write by following precise stroke steps to form a single character that may represent a word or phrase. Additional skills for college readiness are addressed when modern language learning is set within a cultural context, is content-based, uses technology, and connects with global community partners.

Content-based programs, such as dual language immersion initiatives, start early and develop students’ advanced language proficiency in specific areas, such as mathematics, general science, physics, and chemistry. Students who graduate from these programs are not only ready to enter local universities, but universities in a country whose language they studied. In fact, many students who graduate from Kentucky programs, such as the Mandarin Chinese Flagship pipeline program and International Spanish Academies, have automatic entry into universities in those countries.

**BEING PREPARED FOR THE WORKFORCE**

Both business and government urge the addition of linguistic and cultural competence to the core knowledge and skill set of a world-ready graduate.

Since its 2006 report was published, the U.S. Committee for Economic Development has been calling attention to the importance of language and cultural skills for U.S. **economic security**. They warn that America’s continued global leadership is at risk and will depend on our students’ abilities to interact with the world community at home and abroad.

Kentucky’s growing economic stake in international trade and the diversity of Kentucky’s trading partners and investors create a demand for Kentuckians who can apply their world language skills and cultural competency to **business.** Exports to foreign countries contributed more than $22.1 billion to the state’s economy in 2012, with products and services going to 199 countries. Direct foreign investment employs over 90,000 Kentucky workers. To stay competitive Kentucky needs a **multilingual workforce** and an **international mindset**. International relationship marketing relies on cultural understanding and communication—to be really successful, you have to speak the customer’s language. The youth, who will one day lead our state’s economic expansion in international trade and foreign investment, whether through small business or multinational corporations, need advanced language skills and cultural know-how.

The modern languages taught in Kentucky support the state’s economic mission. Kentucky’s top trading partners include: Canada, Mexico, Japan, the UK, Brazil, France, Belgium and China. Our state’s largest foreign investors are: Japan, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, France and Canada. Taking our message overseas, the Governor and Cabinet for Economic Development officials have recently traveled to Japan, Taiwan, Germany, France, Mexico and Panama to attract new business.

A report in the Journal of Business & Economic Research on Kentucky’s preparedness for the coming wave of Hispanic immigration to some parts of the state, warned that a lack of preparedness in cultural understanding and language skill will cause financial and social challenges to certain regions. Among the study’s recommendations, were that managers and co-workers learn basic Spanish language, become aware of their own English jargon and slang, and begin to recognize their own and others’ cultural practices and perspectives.

The cost of monolingualism is high. The Kentucky World Trade Center reports that each year, businesses, state and local education agencies, government offices and private organizations pay large fees to hire interpreters and translation services or provide language training to employees (i.e., business and legal professionals, medical staff, fire and police workers, court employees, etc.) These costs are passed on to citizens. By preparing students with the language skills they need while in they are in school, this cost can be drastically reduced, if not avoided.

Schools can offer classes that are dedicated to a specific career path, such as Spanish for health careers or agriculture, French for culinary arts, German for business, etc. Asian and Arabic languages are much in demand for government posts. Study of American Sign Language provides a pathway for work as an interpreter. In programs preparing students with a minimum of pre-advanced language proficiency, job shadowing or short-term internships can be arranged locally and/or internationally. But it’s important to remember that most jobs require intermediate and advanced level proficiency, necessitating an early start and long sequence of study.

**BEING PREPARED FOR THE MIILITARY AND CITIZEN DIPLOMACY**

The military has long called for improving foreign language skills and cultural capabilities to meet 21st Century national security challenges. Knowledge of other languages and cultures is seen an essential key for mission success of military personnel overseas, required of officers and those in the war colleges (West Point, Air Force Academy, etc.), and recognized with Foreign Language Proficiency pay to active duty soldiers and qualified National Guard and Reservists. As far back as the 1960s, experts complained about the lack of language training in the United States, but it became a prime national security concern with the war on terrorism.

In 2004, a Department of Defense-sponsored study noted that the DoD should treat developing second language skills and regional proficiency as seriously as it treats combat skills. In the past five years, all branches of the service have developed strategic documents to guide the development language and culture skills within their ranks. Fort Knox has an officer designated as Language Advocate to promote language study throughout the state for a more-prepared recruit population.

The National Security Language Initiative, begun by President George Bush in 2005 and coordinated by the State Department, Department of Defense and the National Intelligence Agency, aims to increase the number of Americans speaking critical need languages and communicating at high levels of proficiency. Related summer STARTALK and pipeline Flagship (i.e., Western Kentucky University) programs support schools in building students’ critical need language proficiency.

Students who study a modern language can become citizen diplomats--individuals who help shape U.S. foreign relations 'one handshake at a time.

**HOW DO WE COMPARE WITH OTHERS?**

Foreign countries that outscore US students in math and science on international tests are the same countries that require early language learning of at least one, and as many as four, foreign languages. Many English speaking countries are initiating or strengthening their world language requirements for students: Australia will have a national world language curriculum in 2014; since 2012 England has required world language study beginning at age 7; Scotland's "two plus one" initiative plans to teach two languages in primary school in addition to a child's native language; and Canada is a bilingual (French/English) nation.

Other states are initiating large scale, state-funded, world language programs. In 4 years Utah has gone from 4 to 54 dual language immersion programs, based on legislative funding. Delaware's has an aggressive Governor's World Language Expansion Initiative to begin world language instruction by K or grade 1. North Carolina uses technology to provide world language student self-assessment tools linked to their standards.

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